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- 1 Ever since the publication of Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* in 1987, there have been an impressive number of studies focusing on the imminent decline and collapse of the USA. At that time in the late 1980's, the Cold War between the Americans and the Russians seemed to be a war without an end in sight. Hardly anyone could have imagined that within three years not only would the Cold War be over but also that the Soviet Union would cease to exist. While Kennedy's study was well received, he turned out to be wrong. The US was neither entering a phase of decline, nor was it ripe to be replaced by another power. Even with America's Cold War 'victory' there was still a prevalent discourse in the early 1990's that the vortex of power and influence was moving towards Japan or perhaps even Europe. While this abated somewhat later in the decade with Japan facing serious economic woes and the European Union still undergoing institutional development and not quite meeting expectations, the post-9/11 international situation gave new impetus to the rhetoric of American decline.¹ This was exacerbated by American initiated wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In spite of apparent initial success in these theatres, US military forces became bogged down in both for longer than expected, particularly in the former. The current global economic crisis for most analysts commenced in the US back in 2007-2008, and revealed a number of serious

fundamental problems and weaknesses of the US economy. Such realities provide sufficient fodder for prophets of gloom and doom relative to America's status as a global superpower.

- 2 While some might look at Geir Lundestad's volume as another treatment of a familiar topic, *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"* offers the reader a number of components absent in similar works. Rather than being written in response to specific military interventions or foreign policy practices, Lundestad's timely work is able to incorporate America's recent economic setbacks in his analysis. As he notes, it is awfully difficult making predictions about the rise and fall of Great Powers, and "at best, the predictions about the fall of the United States have so far proved premature" (34). So if 'timing is everything' has Lundestad correctly diagnosed America's looming demise, or is his volume just another study to be committed to the 'dustbin of history' as its predecessors?
- 3 In terms of its organization, *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"* is divided into two parts, the first part is simply titled, *Power*, and the second part is titled, *The Limits of Power*. After the book's brief introduction which identifies some key aspects of America's ascendancy and moments of challenge, Lundestad outlines in adequate detail the institutional foundations of the US power in the twentieth century. A clear beginning point for many scholars is the post World War II period. As the author points out, the USA "was really in a league of its own compared to any of its predecessors" (11) in terms of its economic and military capabilities following the Second World War. A temporary nuclear monopoly and the erection of a foreign policy architecture, including such elements as the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, NATO, as well as the growing role of the CIA, all contributed to the extension of American power at the global level. In addition, international organizations and structures like the UN, the OECD, the IMF, and the World Bank, just to name a few, not only helped in the projection of US influence abroad, but also were decisive in creating a liberal-internationalist capitalist order. Despite these developments, Lundestad also points out major setbacks which took place during the Cold War period, like stalemate in Korea, early setbacks in the Space Race with the Soviets, defeat in Vietnam, and American political malaise of the 1970's. The temporary thaw in US-Soviet relations during the 1970's was replaced by a more aggressive America under the Reagan administration of the 1980's. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and later in the Soviet Union, the Cold War came to an abrupt end, and the world of the 1990's marked a new beginning of sorts to many analysts. It was, according to the Charles Krauthammer, America's 'unipolar moment.' The implosion of the Soviet Union coupled with the expansion of democratic practices and the apparent global embrace of the capitalist ideology seemed to confirm America's status as *the* superpower in the world.
- 4 The optimism of the immediate post-Cold War period was tempered by the harsh realities of international politics. Labels like 'new world order' and notions suggesting that we had reached 'the end of history' proved to be highly premature. The list is alarming: the dissolution of Yugoslavia, genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia Herzegovina, civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, endless fighting in Somalia, and of course the events of 9/11. As Lundestad points out, "events in Iraq and Afghanistan have dramatically illustrated the limitations of US military power" (24) specifically in responding to asymmetrical warfare as conducted by terrorist groups or insurgencies. In the economic sphere America's deficits and debt accumulation have reached exceedingly high levels

impacting negatively on key economic indicators. If that is not enough, Lundestad also reminds readers about the challenges to US supremacy from China and other countries like South Korea and Japan, as well as regional groups such as the European Union. Out of all of these contenders Lundestad is most enthusiastic about China as a potential challenger to US global dominance. He provides the reader with almost thirty pages of analysis to conclude that despite China's impressive rise in power, it "is doubtful that China will then be able to move on to challenge the United States for the overall leadership position" (67).

- 5 By the middle of the volume, the author investigates the debates over whether or not the US is an imperial power. For some this question might be tiresome; is the US a formal or informal empire? Is it an imperial or hegemonic power? And finally, should one speak of American expansionism or American imperialism? Despite the perhaps esoteric nature of the subject, Lundestad, with relative brevity, frames the discussion in an engaging way exhibiting the relevance of this topic and its linkage to any discussion about contemporary American power. Of interest for the reader might be the following: "The American 'empire' was also more impressive in that emerged largely in the course of a ten-year period after the Second World War, while the British Empire developed gradually over two to three centuries" (106). What I find most striking here is Lundestad's use of the word *was*. Just as soon as the debate over America as an imperial power or not seemed to be heating up, the author puts it into past tense. Issues like America's economic problems, questions of "imperial overstretch," and the challenges of domestic politics have impacted on the country's status as a world power. It is part of what Lundestad calls "the impotence of omnipotence," a sort of political paradox. More precisely he sees this as a condition that all "Great Powers" face during their *reigns* of dominance. Coinciding with America's rise was the phenomenon of globalization, (or at least accelerated globalization of the late twentieth century) which also is a key factor in undermining not only aspects of the nation-state, but also of world powers as well. Here again, the author skillfully covers a very complex topic in a very manageable manner. Interestingly enough, some would argue, it was the USA which played a decisive role in creating the global institutions and competitive capitalist practices which today pose the greatest challenges to America's economic vitality. But as Lundestad reminds us, no "country could forever remain Number One...[and] no country can remain the leading country in the world forever (38).
- 6 While this volume has numerous strengths, there were just a couple of points of concern. I was rather surprised to come across the following statement about President Eisenhower: "The Eisenhower administration did little to end racial segregation, particularly in the South" (16). This is not entirely fair considering the fact that Eisenhower did send the 101st Airborne Division of the US Army to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 to enforce the policy of de-segregation of public schools. Also in parts of the historical review, there are some gaps. It seems problematic, for example, to exclude some commentary on the Carter administration which generally, for various reasons, tends to be overlooked in the literature. These observations are minor, because *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire": Power and its Limits in Comparative Perspective* represents a very important and unique contribution to not only American foreign policy analysis but also to imperial studies. What separates this book from other works that focus on US decline is its comparative approach. Instead of examining the US in a vacuum, Lundestad gives the reader both breadth and depth in his coverage of

international politics during the twentieth century. For example, he juxtaposes America's imperial trajectory alongside that of Britain and the Soviet Union, as well as considering the strengths and weaknesses of potential challengers like China, and the EU to US dominance. In addition, Lundestad incorporates different disciplinary approaches in his analysis ranging from an historical or international relations orientation to a political science or geopolitical perspective. In short, Geir Lundestad's scholarly volume is a valuable contribution to the literature which ultimately reminds us about the transitory nature of power and many of the risks involved with imperial pursuits.

NOTES

i The full title of Kennedy's book is, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*.

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